Senate Statistics

Secretaries of the Senate

Charles G. Bennett (1900-1913)

As secretary, Mr. Bennett wrote a primer for statesmen who would be Senate leaders. In this book, he made the rules and regulations of Senate procedure so simple that anybody could go to work as a statesman without being called to order by the presiding officer. –Brooklyn Daily Eagle, May 25, 1914

For Senate Republicans, the 1894 midterm congressional elections brought good news and bad news. The good news was that they would become the majority party at the start of the next Congress. The bad news was that despite their expected five-vote margin over the Democrats, they could not count on a working majority. Standing in the way of full party control were six western Republican senators who opposed their national party's position on currency issues and five independent senators who were generally hostile to Republican legislative goals. In the face of these divisions, Republican party leaders were not able even to make their own choice of a secretary of the Senate or a sergeant at arms. Rather than risk a prolonged floor fight, the Republicans decided to keep the men the Democrats had selected two years earlier.

This stalemate lasted another four years until the 1898 congressional elections. In those contests, energized by a Republican administration's prosecution of the Spanish-American War, the GOP boosted its Senate margin to more than twice that of the Democrats. With the convening of the new Congress in December 1899, Republican leaders moved decisively to claim their prize.

Shortly after New Year's Day in 1900, rumors of an intended political housecleaning swept Capitol Hill. According to newspaper accounts, all holdover Senate Democratic officers and most of the staff who owed their jobs to that party would soon be sent packing.

Several names surfaced as possible contenders for the secretary's job, but that contest remained undefined until Senator Thomas Platt—a powerful New York Republican—announced his support for Charles Bennett, a two-term House member from Brooklyn who had lost his seat in the recent election. Recalling the service of former Representative Anson McCook as secretary from 1883 to 1893, Platt joked that the

Senate might not be ready for another recently defeated New York Republican congressman.

He was right. Before his death several months earlier, Vice President Garrett Hobart had secured written pledges from more than three-quarters of the Republican senators in support of General J. S. Clarkson, a high official within that party's national committee. As the announced date of the party caucus neared, however, opponents of Clarkson raised questions about his suitability. A Bennett supporter whispered to one journalist that Clarkson was less than a "gentleman." Supporting the importance of having a "gentleman" in the office, one newspaper informed its readers that the "Secretary is an officer who is thrown very intimately into the society of Senators and they [Bennett's supporters] have had some experiences that have led them to decide that a gentleman must occupy it or it must be left vacant."

Disgusted by this turn of events, General Clarkson asked that his name be withdrawn, but his allies ignored the request. When the Republican caucus convened on January 24, 1900, the first vote produced a tie between Bennett and Clarkson. In a second ballot, Bennett secured his party's nomination with a one-vote majority. Five days later, the full Senate confirmed his selection.

Charles Goodwin Bennett was born in Brooklyn on December 11, 1863. The son of the publisher of the Brooklyn Daily Times, he attended public schools and graduated from the New York Law School at age nineteen. He went on to establish the People's Bank of Brooklyn and to serve as chairman of its executive committee. In his early twenties, he used his banking connections to good advantage in Brooklyn Republican circles and became president of the People's Bridge Association to lobby for construction of an East River span that would connect the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn with Manhattan. In 1892, he won his party's nomination to an open seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, but lost the general election by a sizeable margin in a year that favored Democratic candidates.

Two years later, a severe economic depression discredited the administration of Democratic President Grover Cleveland and opened the way for a new generation of Republican congressional challengers. In a victory of landslide proportions, Republicans picked up 120 seats in the House, including one for Bennett, who triumphed by a nearly two-to-one margin.

Representative Bennett won a seat on the influential House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. On that panel, he obtained a major appropriation to widen and dredge two important Brooklyn waterways. This ensured his easy reelection in 1896. In the next Congress, Bennett also gained a seat on the Committee on Expenditures in the Navy Department, a post particularly helpful to a constituency that included employees of the Brooklyn Navy Yard during the Spanish-American War. When the United States annexed Hawaii following the war, Bennett led a successful campaign to construct a trans-Pacific cable to that new American territory. In spite of these accomplishments, he

failed to mount an effective reelection campaign in the fall of 1898 and lost his seat to a strong Democratic challenger.

The Washington Evening Star of February 1, 1900, carried an account of Bennett's election as secretary of the Senate and included the following note intended to discourage job-seekers from pestering either him or the newly elected Senate sergeant at arms. "They have nothing to do with the question of appointments, which is solely in the hands of the Republican caucus committee. The caucus has appointed a [patronage] committee and this committee will arrange for the distribution of places in which changes are made. This process will be very similar to that adopted by the Democrats when they were in control in 1893 and will involve changes in about seventy-five places. These changes will be made gradually."

Although he had few jobs to distribute, Secretary Bennett supervised a staff that increasingly came to reflect a division between patronage employees and career workers. Several months before he took office, Senate party leaders agreed in principle to define the two categories of employees to protect those who were essential to floor operations from further changes in party control, while spotlighting less crucial positions that senior members might wish to award to political supporters. The Senate also agreed to protect specific staff members, including aging Civil War veterans, in recognition of their long service. Once those protected individuals left the Senate, however, their positions would revert to patronage status. Although this plan was first set in place in 1899, it languished for the next twelve years because an increasingly large Republican majority (in 1907 the party ratio stood at sixty-one Republicans to twenty-nine Democrats) did not have to worry about Democrats grabbing their positions. The election of 1910, however, reduced the Republican margin to only seven members. Early in 1911, Secretary Bennett helped party leaders establish lists, which for the first time recognized the protected status of floor staff.

Described as "athletic and strikingly handsome," Secretary Bennett maintained a wide circle of Washington friends. He enjoyed sumptuous meals with fellow members of a dining club—known as the Tapeworms—founded by the 275-pound Speaker of the House, Thomas B. Reed. Bennett loved baseball and was never happier than when attending Washington Senators' games with his fellow Tapeworm, Vice President James "Sunny Jim" Sherman.

As the first twentieth-century secretary, Charles Bennett participated in many decisions that helped set the foundations of the modern Senate. During his thirteen-year tenure, the Senate obtained its first permanent office building; purchased the first automobile for the use of the vice president; installed a refrigeration device to help cool its chamber; and instituted detailed administrative procedures to keep track of its growing support staff. Responding to the indictment and conviction of several members with active law practices, the Senate prohibited members from representing private clients before the U.S. Court of Claims; it also established rules—following a senatorial fistfight in the chamber—restraining senators from publicly questioning the conduct or motives of their

colleagues. In that era, the chamber hosted two impeachment trials, eight contested election case inquiries, and William Howard Taft's 1909 presidential inauguration.

Concerned over the growing complexity of parliamentary procedure long before the arrival of the first official parliamentarian, the Senate in 1908 directed its chief clerk to assemble and publish a digest of Senate precedents and decisions on points of order. When the election of 1912 produced twenty-four new senators—and returned the Senate to Democratic control for the first time in eighteen years, Secretary Bennett prepared a pocket guide on floor procedure to help members of this large incoming class. Published just before he yielded his office to a Democratic successor, Bennett's twelve-page "primer for statesmen" listed the daily order of procedure, ranked motions in priority order, and identified motions for which no debate was permissible. It also offered scripts (with stage directions indicating pauses) for the convenience of presiding officers and senators. One of those scripts guided members in seeking unanimous consent to proceed to the consideration of a bill years before this became a prerogative of the majority leader.

Soon after the Senate of the Sixty-third Congress convened in March 1913, Charles Bennett returned to his Brooklyn law firm. A year earlier, he had suffered what press accounts described as a "complete breakdown," but his health had improved sufficiently for him to serve out his term as secretary. Back in Brooklyn, his health problems returned and on May 25, 1914, he died at the age of fifty-one.